DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 383 677 SP 036 017

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TITLE Peer Support and the Development of Metalearning in School-Based Initial Teacher Education (ITE).
PUB DATE 22 Apr 95
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, April 18-22, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Educational Philosophy; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Graduate Study; Higher Education; Metacognition; *Peer Influence; *Peer Relationship; Preservice Teacher Education; Reflective Teaching; *Self Concept; *Student Teacher Attitudes; Student Teachers; Teacher Role; *Teaching Styles
IDENTIFIERS United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study of four students working in pairs during a 1-year postgraduate Initial Teacher Education (ITE) course in the United Kingdom. The study examined the subjects' images and assumptions and developing teaching styles at the start of the year, and analyzed what they learned from each other during the school-based parts of their course using taped conversations between the partners and in-depth individual interviews at the end of the course. Findings suggested that peer work was of primary importance in the development of students' meta-learning, or the process by which they came to understand their own teaching style. Much of the peer interaction was in the form of general support. Students rarely offered each other advice or questioned each other but rather engaged in parallel, rather disconnected conversations that appeared to provide an opportunity for each to clarify and develop their own thoughts about their own teaching. The early articulation of images also appeared to enable students to develop their understanding of their own teaching style. Students who began the year with clear images of themselves were later able to reflect on how those images had changed or been clarified during the year. On the other hand, the student who began the course with an ill-defined image of himself as a teacher showed no ability to articulate either his self-image or his teaching style with greater clarity as the year progressed. (Contains 28 references.) (JB)

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Peer Support and the Development of Metalearning in School-Based Initial Teacher Education (ITE)

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Abstract

The role that peers play in the school-based elements of ITE courses has been an underused resource. Where there has been research carried out in this area it has concentrated on course design, teaching structures and specific approaches to facilitate peer work. There has been little consideration given to the images, beliefs and assumptions, and individual teaching styles of the students involved, nor to the affective and emotional factors which may be influential in learning to teach, and which may have an impact on their peer work. This paper presents a case study of four students working in pairs in two different schools during a one year post graduate ITE course. It examines their images and assumptions, and developing teaching styles at the start of the year, and analyses what they learn from each other during the school-based parts of their course using taped conversations between the partners, and in-depth individual interviews at the end of the course.

Findings suggest that peer work is of primary importance in the development of students' metalearning, or the process by which they come to understand their own teaching style. This is in contrast to interaction with school mentors which seems to inhibit students' learning at this level. The reasons for this are discussed. The early articulation of images also appears to enable students to develop their understanding of their own teaching style.

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Introduction and Objectives

All student teachers during their ITE course are obliged to spend some time working in schools and classrooms. In some countries the proportion of course time they must spend in school-based work has increased over recent years (Department for Education, 1992). In consequence, students spend less time with their university tutors, and receive less supervision from them. School placements may be spread over a geographically wide area, and students will find less opportunity to spend time sharing their experiences with their fellow peers. All of these factors suggest that, as a result of greater school-based courses, students may suffer a greater sense of isolation than previously.

There are concerns as to the level of support that students receive from within schools. In addition to students, school mentors have other priorities competing for their time. This may be compounded by a narrow, institutionally-bound view of learning to teach that schools may offer. The conception of teachers as "doers" rather than as "thinkers" (Richert, 1994) may serve to focus the students on the organisation and management of working in schools, at the expense of a commitment to their deeper learning (Fenstermacher, 1992). With more responsibility for the assessment of students being passed to schools, there is a danger that students will feel under pressure to conform to the norms that operate in their particular school (Calderhead & Robson, 1991).

In addition to such concerns which arise from school-based courses, there are considerable tensions within the supervisory role, whether undertaken by university tutor or school mentor (Blumberg, 1976. Zimpher, deVoss & Nott, 1980). Research suggests that students find the supervisor's role a difficult one to work with, since the supervisor is there as both 'helper' and 'assessor' (Williams, Butt & Soares, 1992. Boothroyd, 1979). Moreover, some studies suggest that these tensions are particularly marked where the school mentor acts as supervisor since mentors fail to bring the important perspective of an outsider to the task (Swanwick, 1990. Proctor, 1984. Zimpher, deVoss & Nott, 1980).

Against these problematic relationships on ITE courses, there is evidence that student peers are an underused resource. Research asking students what they would have missed had their course been more school-based found the highest rating given to "sharing of ideas, experience and expertise with other students" (Swanwick, 1990, p. 204), a finding which echoes Furlong's research (Booth, Furlong & Wilkins, 1990, p. 92).

Unlike medical education and counselling (Lincoln & McAllister, 1993. Borders, 1991. Remley, Benshoff & Mowbray, 1987) there is little in the way of research devoted specifically to the potential that peer support offers in teacher education. The objectives of the reported study are, therefore, to examine this potential, in the context of the school-based elements of an ITE course.The study focuses on what students learn from each other and examines the ways in which this may contribute to their professional development.

Theoretical Framework

Learning to teach is a complex process. Too often the design of teacher education courses are the result of institutional factors and external considerations which, once in place, are difficult to change, and become almost reified in their status. At the same time, there is a growing literature on the need to understand more about the individuals who become students on such courses, their (often unarticulated) images and assumptions about teaching and learning, along with a consideration of how these factors can best be accommodated on courses to facilitate professional development.

Learning Paradigm

Gardiner (1989), in examining supervisory relationships in the social work context, examines two different paradigms of training. The traditional paradigm sees development following set rates and patterns, and courses within this model consequently focus on teaching and course design. An alternative paradigm puts a higher focus on student learning, and acknowledges that student learning is not synonymous with teaching, that styles of teaching and learning may not be congruous, and that students may learn in different ways at different times.

Teacher education, with its aim of developing reflective practice, shows some commitment to this second paradigm, although in practice the concerns of organisation, management and assessment of courses may serve to compromise the central focus on student learning.

The literature on learning from peers in school-based settings is slim. There have been several studies involving peer clinical supervision (Clarke, 1986. McFaul & Cooper, 1984. Russell & Spafford, 1986. Pavelich, 1992), others involving peer dialogue drawing from professional literature and practical experience (Glattorn, 1987. Marshall & Herrmann, 1990), and others examining the impact of different approaches to reflection, including interaction with peers (Richert, 1992). The emphasis in each of these studies is on the programme and its design, and is often focused on method work in the college-based elements of teacher education, to the neglect of examining the role of peers in the practical, school-based parts of courses. Each of these studies lays stress on a teaching paradigm. The study reported here is situated more within a learning paradigm, by examining the fairly routine interaction between peers while they are placed in schools together.

Images

The study can also be regarded as lying within a learning paradigm by starting with the individual learners and the particular orientations, images and assumptions they bring with them onto the course, which in turn might influence what they subsequently learn from each other. In examining the individual learners, it is increasingly acknowledged that learning to teach is not only a very complex task, but also involves a long journey of personal growth (Butler, 1992. Nias, 1989). An emphasis on public knowledge, the rational, cognitive development of teachers' skills is no longer seen as sufficient; personal knowledge, affective and emotional factors are also influential in learning to teach. Beliefs about teaching originate in

childhood, when as pupils teachers-to-be experience and acquire the norms and expectations of schooling. These early experiences influence, both positively and sometimes negatively, the images beginner teachers hold about what they want to be as teachers. Their images shape the way they begin teaching and their teaching style, as well as influencing the way they view experience (Calderhead & Robson, 1991). The ability to articulate the image of self as teacher is also seen as important in professional development. Kagan's (1992) model of teacher growth suggests that beginner teachers are not able to focus realistically on pupil learning until their own tacit beliefs of self as teacher have been understood. The cost, therefore, of not addressing these incoming assumptions has implications for both teacher and pupil development.

Metalearning

Gardiner (1989) presents a model of teaching and learning which involves three levels of interaction. The first level concerns content, with a focus on what is to be taught, often with particular outcomes in mind. The second relates to process, where what students bring to a placement, and how they construct meaning from their own experiences is seen as important. The third level of interaction is described as metalearning, or learning to learn, and the development of an awareness, understanding and articulation of one's own particular teaching style, where it is acknowledged that students learn and teach in different ways. A concern with the rational, acquisition of skills which is an aspect of learning to teach, and one which continues to dominate the assessment of teacher education (Department for Education, 1992), may characterise the interaction between student teachers and their supervisors. Tutors and mentors may, therefore, contribute most to the content of student teachers' learning. By contrast, because of their shared position as student teachers, along with the equal status between peers, the affective and emotional aspects of learning to teach is likely to characterise the nature of the interaction between student teachers. It is in this second area of the process of learning that peers may make their greatest contribution to teacher development. The study presented here examines the extent to which peers learn from each other at any of these levels and, in particular, whether peer work can contribute to the process of learning, and the development of metalearning.

Data Source

Data was collected from four sources. Firstly, when students arrived on the course they recorded their early images of teachers and their image of self as a teacher. Secondly, over the first few weeks of the course they kept reflective journals of their early classroom experiences in their first practice schools. Students were free to make whatever comments they wished in their journals, which therefore represented an indication of what was noteworthy to each of them. These two data sources were used to establish the images and teaching styles of the four students involved which they brought onto the course and which, in turn, could influence what they, as individuals, learnt.

Thirdly, during their school placement students were encouraged to watch each other teach, to discuss their teaching, and to audio-tape such conversations, which were transcribed and analysed (see below).

Fourthly, the students' perceptions of this shared peer work were discussed in individual in-depth interviews. This was also an opportunity for the students to comment on my initial, tentative findings from the earlier three data sources, and also represents an important aspect of illuminative case study research where the voice of the participants should be clearly heard.

Analysis of Conversations

The aim of examining the conversations between peers was to elicit what student teachers learn from each other during their interaction in school-based settings. Analysis of these conversations used data reduction methods drawn from existing research into the value of peer work.

The research that does exist on students or teachers working together is broadly in agreement as to the value of such interaction. Peer work, it has been found, tends to boost self-confidance since peers tend to be supportive rather than challenging or critical of each other (Clarke, 1986. McFaul & Cooper, 1984). Spafford, in describing her own experience of peer clinical supervision, suggests that it helped her to develop a better concept of herself as a teacher, "because I had an investment in the supervisory process, I felt less like a child and more like the professional adult I was supposed to be" (Russell & Spafford, p. 8). There is, however, some disagreement as to whether peer work encourages greater risk taking (Goldsberry, 1984. Hawkey, 1994) or whether it simply offers (much valued) support (Clarke, 1986. McFaul & Cooper, 1984. Russell & Spafford, 1986).

The conversations, therefore, were analysed with the aim of eliciting how far peer work was functional as support and how far it promoted risk taking. To do this the communication styles used were examined. Arguably a questioning approach might indicate a readiness to engage in reflection and possibly risk taking, while offering advice might suggest a confidence in one's own knowledge or, alternatively a reluctance to engage in critical discussion. A style of giving general support might suggest a reluctance to criticise or challenge a peer. While it was valuable to examine the overall balance between styles of communication, the categories used were very broad, so that communication needed to be looked at in context in order to gain an understanding of the intention

Results, Conclusions, Points of View

The research resulted in two main findings, the first associated with peers enabling each other to understand their teaching style, the second to do with the importance of students being aware of the images they hold of teaching.

Teaching Style and Metalearning

The first stage of the case study revealed clear images on the parts of three of the four students. The reflective journal entries during the first term confirmed the persistence of their early images as influential factors in their emerging teaching style. One student, for example, who saw the establishing of positive relationships at the heart of her image of herself as a teacher, in her journal wrote a lot about what individual pupils did in her classes, the dynamic between pupils, and her relationships with staff.

In conversation with each other, the main communication style used by all the students was that of offering general support, thereby confirming much of the previous research on the value of peers working together. A questioning style was rarely used, suggesting that peers are unable or reluctant to be challenging or critical of each other, which again might be taken as confirmation of previous research findings on the limitations of peer work. Similarly, the students rarely offered each other advice, and instead engaged in what can best be described as parallel, rather disconnected conversations, with each one talking about their own, rather than their partner's, concerns. Certainly in the respect of content this would suggest that students learnt very little from each other. The conversations, however, did appear to provide an opportunity for each to clarify and develop their own thoughts about their own teaching, and to that extent showed that peers might contribute to the process of learning to teach.

In the follow-up interviews, all of the students felt that their shared work together offered much valued empathy and support. Always conscious of their shared positions as pre-service teachers, they were careful not to offer criticism of each other or challenge. To this extent peers demonstrate a sensitivity towards the emotional aspects of beginning teaching, and can be seen to contribute to the process of learning to teach. More interestingly, however, they went on to say that they had learnt most about their own teaching style through interaction with a peer, rather than through interaction with a mentor. They suggested several reasons for this being the case, each of them to do with the status of students and that of mentors. The equal status of peers, they thought, enabled them to understand their own individual style, in contrast to their partner's style. The authoritative status of mentors, their established teaching position and ways of operating, along with their role in assessment, by contrast, served to inhibit the learning about their own teaching style that took place from this sort of interaction with a mentor. This suggests that peers have much to contribute not only in the process of learning, but also in the development of metalearning, or the understanding of their own teaching style.

Images

It was mentioned above that the early part of the case study revealed that three of the four students had fairly clear images of themselves as teachers. In their follow-up interviews they were able to articulate this image, and explain how it had developed or changed over the year. The fourth student, by contrast, had an ill defined image of himself as a teacher or his teaching style at the beginning of the course. In his follow-up interview, although he recognised the supportive value of peer work, he showed no ability to articulate either his image or his own

teaching style with greater clarity as the year progressed. In his case peer work seemed to have little value in the development of metalearning, and enabling him to understand his teaching style. The case study reported here, although only dealing with four students and therefore making no claims to generalisability, does suggest that an awareness and early articulation of images may help students in their professional development. The research might offer a weak and rather tentative confirmation of Kagan's (1992) model of teacher growth which suggests that students must first become aware of their own tacit beliefs if they are to focus on pupil learning. This, in turn, could have considerable implications for selection onto courses, as well for course structure and design.

Educational Importance of the Study

Unlike many of the studies relating to peer work which focus on techniques and the design of courses, the study presented here falls more within a learning paradigm, by placing greater emphasis on investigating the orientations of the individuals involved, and the learning which takes place as a result of peer interaction. The findings suggest that, in contrast to interaction with mentors, the role that peers play in contributing to the process of learning and the development of metalearning is of primary importance, and has been underused. That interaction between peers facilitates an understanding of the development of individual teaching style is an important finding. As courses become more school-based, there is the danger that students may feel under greater pressure to conform to and to replicate the styles of their supervising mentors. Working with a peer may offer an approach which, by enhancing individual styles, lies at the heart of the reflective process and professional activity. As a factor in achieving this, there is also a need to develop greater understanding of the images of incoming students, their beliefs and assumptions, and their individual teaching styles, which students can also articulate to themselves.

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